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Partygoers felt weak, woozy before detecting monoxide poisoning

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Marines are tough and they don't complain.

That's a big part of the reason Gunnery Sgt. Michael Butler and several of his fellow Marines didn't speak up early Saturday night when they felt weak, woozy and irritable at a formal party in Red Lodge.

A few thought they were feeling the effects of a hangover from the night before, the altitude or general fatigue.

Toxic fumes

They didn't know until later that their bodies were being poisoned by a carbon monoxide leak at the Rock Creek Resort. But by the end of the night, more than 40 partygoers were sent to the hospital, including Butler and his wife, Jennifer, who is eight months pregnant.

"The whole thing was just really weird," Jennifer Butler said Monday afternoon at the couple's Billings apartment.

Marines are used to a few wild times at their annual birthday ball every fall. But Saturday's celebration - held in Red Lodge to mark the 230th anniversary and recent return of several Marines from Iraq - takes the cake, Michael Butler said.

Incredibly, he noted, no one died and no one was seriously hurt.

Strange event

"This is my 13th year in the Marine Corps and this is by far the strangest (birthday ball) I've ever attended," said Butler, an active-duty Marine who works out of Billings.

The Butlers were two of 42 people taken to Beartooth Hospital in Red Lodge after the leak was discovered Saturday night. They were later taken by ambulance to Billings Clinic, where they spent the night and were released Sunday.

On Monday, one person remained hospitalized and was listed in good condition, according to hospital officials.

The Butlers were still feeling some of the effects of the carbon monoxide on Monday. Doctors said their unborn child, due in early December, appeared to be fine but also said the residual effects of the exposure could cause lung, brain or other complications.

"We're just going to have to sweat it out and see," Michael Butler said.

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that can cause nausea, vomiting, impaired brain function and other problems by depriving the blood of the ability to carry oxygen. In high doses, it can be fatal.

Emergency officials said they believe the carbon monoxide came from a heating system used for the pool and hot tub at the resort.

Two employees with the state's Building Codes Bureau in Helena are scheduled to arrive at the resort today to inspect the boilers.

"We're going to go down and see what we can find out," said Tim Lloyd, the bureau's chief.

He said the two boilers are inspected by a private insurance carrier. It appears that the boilers have been inspected on schedule and that all of the paperwork for the inspections is in order, Lloyd said.

Montana state law does not require carbon monoxide detectors for boilers.

Officials at Rock Creek Resort declined to comment Monday and said the matter has been forwarded to their insurance company.

Saturday's incident was the talk of Beartooth Hospital and in local Marine circles on Monday.

Those who were there heaped high praise on Navy corpsmen and an Air Force lieutenant colonel with medical training who were among the first to diagnose the problem. They also praised the emergency volunteers who came from Red Lodge, Joliet, Bridger and Cody and Powell, Wyo., and other communities.

Those who responded were meeting behind closed doors Monday night in Red Lodge to discuss what happened, what went right and what improvements might be needed before the next large-scale emergency.

"I thought it was very successful," said Tom Kuntz, chief of the Red Lodge Rural Fire Department, on Monday afternoon.

The Butlers are still in disbelief about what they saw Saturday night.

Michael Butler said he started feeling the effects earlier in the day when a group of Marines were rehearsing a ceremony in a banquet room at the resort. He said he didn't think much of it, figuring he was just tired or feeling the effects of festivities the night before.

Later that night, though, he felt much worse.

"I felt so tired and dizzy and I felt completely intoxicated," he said. "I had become inebriated but I hadn't been drinking."

He became irritable and irrational, he said, and "I knew something wasn't right."

During a formal ceremony, some of the Marines were sick and weak, rolling their eyes while they tried to stand and buckling at the knees.

Soon, several had collapsed. Women also began passing out, including one who hit her head when she fell in the bathroom.

"I'm looking around and just seeing people fall over," Michael Butler said. "It was crazy."

At first, Jennifer Butler just thought she was suffering ills of her pregnancy with shortened breath and nausea. She left the banquet room to get some fresh air, but the symptoms remained.

"I didn't think anything of it," she said. "All I heard were people saying 'It must be the altitude, it must be the altitude.' "

But as more people collapsed or complained of sickness, medical officers deduced that the air was making them sick. They ordered the building evacuated immediately.

"When they said evacuate, all I could think of was my wife and baby," Michael Butler said.

His wife rode in an ambulance to the Beartooth Hospital with the two other pregnant women at the party. Her husband took another car.

At the hospital, the Butlers, still dressed in their formal attire, were treated with pure oxygen in an effort to combat the carbon monoxide in their blood.

The situation was tense and scary, they said, but was handled well by all of the emergency workers involved.

"They were absolutely amazing," Jennifer Butler said. "They knew their stuff."

The couple received more oxygen at Billings Clinic, and Jennifer received extra evaluation because of the baby.

They feel fortunate that the leak was detected when it was. If everyone had gone to sleep that night as the leak continued, the results could have been deadly.

"We were lucky," Michael Butler said.

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